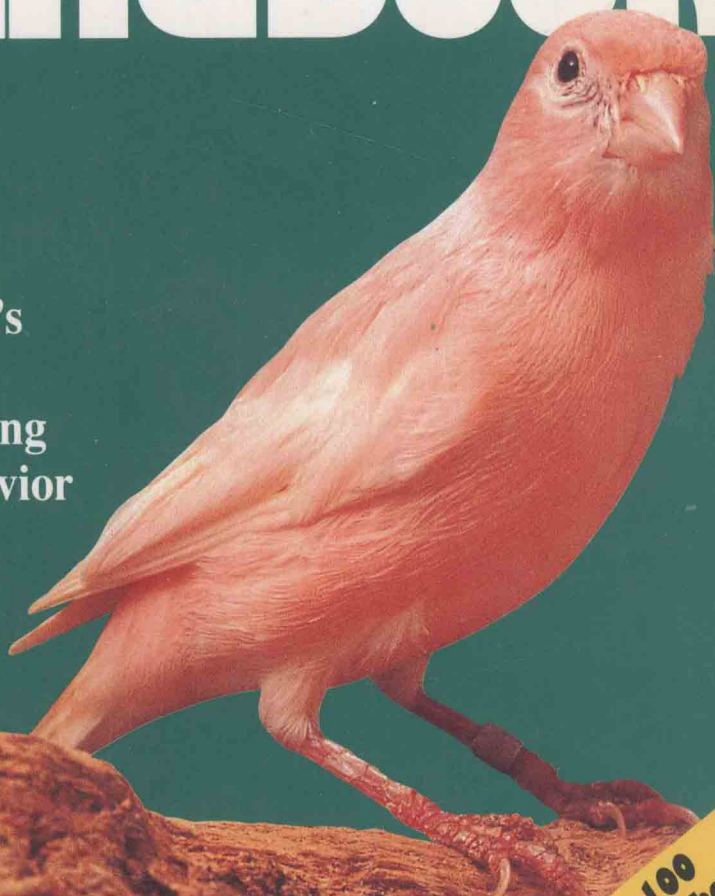


The New Canary Handbook

Purchase
Feeding
Maintaining
your canary's
health
Understanding
canary behavior



Over 100
Full-Color Photos
and Drawings

Matthew M. Vriends, PhD

The New Canary Handbook

Everything About Purchase, Care,
Diet, Disease, and Behavior

With a Special Chapter on
Understanding Canaries

With Drawings by Michele Earle-Bridges
and 56 Color Photographs



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Preface

As a canary breeder for many years, I personally have experienced the day-to-day problems that arise in a collection of birds; the same problems indeed that you, the canary fancier and reader of this book, also will experience.

This book functions as a general aid and guide for the canary fancy. It deals with the keeping, caring for, and diseases of canaries, in great detail. Chapter by chapter, it hopes to enhance and increase the simple pleasures that the canary fancier experiences with his or her birds. The text provides the necessary information to breed canaries with greater success. It relates, explains, and gives examples. The more advanced fancier will also find information here, in simple language, that will enable him or her to breed more beautiful canaries.

There are no formulas in this book! Although logical and clear to those who can understand them and worthy in practice as far as breeding goes, formulas are much too complicated. Happily, it is entirely possible to learn about breeding color canaries and to understand simple genetics, without the use of complicated formulas. The secrets of heredity—which to the beginner are full of mystery and pitfalls—need not be the exclusive property of the experts.

I would like to acknowledge those who have helped in the preparation of this work. In particular I thank my wife, Lucia Vriends-Parent, for her ever unselfish assistance and support, without which this book never would have materialized. Thanks to my friend and colleague John Coborn (Queensland, Australia) for his great amount of work, and whose enthusiasm, knowledge, and expertise have helped simplify the project. Last but not least, I thank the many canary fanciers at home and abroad who, over the years, have helped keep me in the forefront of "our" hobby. These include two well-known fanciers: J. Peter Hill, DVM from Cincinnati, Ohio, undeniably one of our most eminent avian veterinarians, and Arthur Freud, publisher of *American Cage Bird Magazine* and a most outstanding aviculturist; both have given their time to carefully study the manuscript and to make constructive remarks, for which I am extremely grateful. Any shortcomings in the text are my sole responsibility; I will gratefully receive any constructive criticisms or new ideas pertaining to this work.

Matthew M. Vriends

Loveland, Ohio

Summer 1991

For my grandchild Kimberly
"Soyons fidèles à nos faiblesses."

Considerations Before You Buy

How It All Started

Of the hundreds of birds that I have had in my possession over many years, I still remember my first canary very well indeed. It was a green hen of some kind—not a particular beauty, but at the time I regarded her as the most beautiful creature I had ever seen! I had obtained the hen from the teacher of the third grade in my primary school as a reward for being the first pupil to rattle off multiplication tables up to 20. I was, of course, immensely proud of this achievement, but even more impressed with the prize!

The bird was installed in a cage in our living room at home, but it wasn't long before my father showed his annoyance because the bird did not sing. One day he came home with a cock Harz canary who was placed with the hen in the cage, and who was soon singing his heart out to her (it was the beginning of the breeding season). Shortly thereafter, an acquaintance visited us and suggested that the pair of canaries be provided with a breeding cage. And so I became a canary breeder.

I still remember my fascination and boundless wonder when I saw the first blue-green egg that was laid by my hen in her flannel-lined nest pan. I still remember the excitement of the incubation time; my trepidation that the incubation would be unsuccessful in our living room, and my joy when the youngsters hatched.

It may sound incredible, but in that first year, my hen canary raised not less than 16 healthy youngsters, a feat that rarely has been repeated with the many canaries I have kept since.

I still remember the first youngsters very well; they were variegated as indeed most canaries were at that time, and I am still convinced the cocks would have put up a pretty good show in a song contest had they been entered. The original cock, the father of the stud, lived many years in a nice brass cage in our living room, whereas my

other birds were housed in the loft, and later in the garden. He had, as I remember, the life of a prince; he was rarely in his cage and usually flew freely around the room. We named him Ike, and when the sad day came that he fell dead from his perch, we all felt a tragic loss.

I should have asked myself at that time how a green hen and a yellow cock could produce variegated youngsters, but I did not have much knowledge of genetics and indeed was not particularly interested. That came later, when I obtained my first color canaries.

At that time, just after World War II, the majority of canaries were kept just for their song. Television and stereo players were virtually unknown; some people owned a phonograph, but the crackly tone of such an apparatus was no competition for the clear sound of the canary's song.

The times have indeed changed. The canaries now found in our living rooms are there in most cases not just because of their song, but because an attractive living bird can be regarded as a friend and companion or because an ornamental cage can be an artistic addition to our contemporary interior design! The modern canary has improved in color, but the canary song is drowned by the cacophony of noises with radio, television, and CDs in our homes.

But the canary fancy fortunately has remained with us and, probably with the help of the increased free time available to us, has gained a new lease on life. For many, the decorative canary cage is a welcome contrast to plain interiors of our modern dwellings, as demonstrated by the great numbers of cages one sees in the windows or on the balconies of apartment blocks in our great cities. The canary is also regarded by many as a good friend, a joy to the elderly, and a cheerful home companion. Thus, there is always a healthy trade in color and song canaries. Every year thousands of canaries are imported, and there is also always a good market for homebred specimens.

Considerations Before You Buy

The canary breeder also has a choice; you can specialize in color, song, or type canaries, or just breed canaries! Indeed, the canary fancy is a many-sided hobby!

How Do You Become a Canary Fancier?

One of the greatest canary breeders we know, a man who in his life has bred many thousands of birds, often tells the story of how he became a canary fancier. He caught a vagrant canary hen that flew into his kitchen, and from this unlikely beginning, he became a stalwart of the fancy. His experience is not unlike that of my own, whose "addiction" to the hobby also was triggered by a single hen. Once we did a survey, purely for interest's sake, to ask how various canary fanciers became involved with their hobby. Some answered that they had become fanciers just because they were attracted to canaries and it was remarkable to hear how many fanciers had been influenced by this factor. Some had more or less inherited the hobby from father to son; others had friends or relations in the hobby and thus had become attracted to it, and yet others had ended up with canaries via fancy chickens, pigeons, wild birds, or parakeets.

One person had found an aviary in his new garden when he moved into another house and had installed a pair of canaries, because he was (as he said) too lazy to pull the aviary down! Naturally there also will be a reason why you, the reader, will want to become a canary fancier: the simple pleasure derived from an interesting hobby in your free time, the joy of hearing the clear tones of a singing canary, the delight in seeing your first nest of helpless youngsters, the satisfaction of a successful breeding season, the pride in winning an exhibition prize...

Genuine canary fanciers never have time to waste. They must care for their birds, they putter about building cages and aviaries, nest boxes, breeding cages, and flights; they enjoy their birds every day, they read about new aspects of the hobby, they talk about their birds with other fanciers. In short, they always have something to do and there is no question of boredom.

There are many things that can make your hobby even more interesting, but nobody can become a canary breeder overnight. You must go slowly but ever deeply into the noble art, and the deeper you go, the more it will fascinate you.

A good tip: never stagnate in your hobby. Endeavor to be always improving your knowledge and expertise of canaries and their breeding; this in itself will give you ever increasing gratification. This book will help you to derive pleasure from the hobby and will be there to use whenever you need it.

Victory March of the Canary

Many years have passed since Jean de Bethancourt (see page 68) placed the first canaries in a cage. These are years in which the canary has performed a victory march to all parts of the world. Never in history has a bird become so popular as the canary, and no songbird has ever been so intensively bred.

Why the canary should have been chosen as the most popular pet songbird is a mystery. Before the red factor canary was "discovered,"

[1]

Top left: The Belgian fancy was at the height of its fame in the nineteenth century.

Top right: Both the Scots and the English claim the honor of developing the border canary. It is the oldest of the varieties bred for its shape.

Bottom: The crested canary is mentioned in a treatise dated 1793.





Considerations Before You Buy

there were many birds more colorful than canaries; birds that, with similar care and dedication as that given to the canary, could just as easily have been domesticated. Why then, has just the canary become a domesticated pet?

One can, of course, look at a summary of the canary's attributes. It is not particularly shy and is extremely adaptable; it has a pretty song and attractive appearance; it breeds more readily than most other captive birds. It will thrive in almost any climate and is very easy to feed, as it is almost a total seed eater.

But that is not all; the canary has attributes that are difficult to put into words, but that make it, more than any other bird, an ideal house pet.

Jean de Bethancourt's legacy then, is millions of canaries bred over the years, making it the most prolific of all domesticated songbirds. The number of canaries in the United States alone is estimated to be two million!

The canaries bred over the years have brought as much joy to mankind as the two million American birds are still bringing to us today. The various possibilities of canary breeding over the years have brought every fancier what he wants, whether it be for the song, color and the song, color and type, color and special feathering, large canaries, small canaries, multicolored canaries, and so on. And the repertoire is not yet complete; fanciers can still project new possibilities, new colors.

Whatever the canary is asked to do, it is willing to oblige. It is the friend of the quantity breeder as much as that of the specialist breeder; it raises its youngsters in sometimes adverse con-

ditions. It demands nothing more than a little care, and rewards the fancier a thousand times for it. That is the secret of the canary, the secret of its popularity, and the secret that makes it breeding bird number one.

Love and Dedication

Without love and dedication to your hobby, it will come to nothing! If you turn to canaries just for something to do, then it is better if you don't begin rather than get bored later. Also, do not think that you will get rich from breeding canaries.

If you like birds in general, though, and you are drawn to canaries in particular, if you have love, dedication, and ongoing enthusiasm to take the canary fancy seriously—to regard it as a hobby and sacred pastime, rather than a means of making a profit—then you have the makings of a good fancier.

Canary keeping is going to cost money—how much depends on what you want to spend. If you want to start big—build and buy lots of cages and aviaries, purchase the best of everything—then the hobby will cost you a lot of money, especially at the beginning. But if you decide to make a small and sensible entry into the fancy, it will not need to cost a great deal at all. As long as you don't have two left hands, you can quite easily make a serviceable breeding cage and purchase one or two breeding pairs of canaries.

Then if you barter or sell any youngsters you breed and use the money to buy better canary stock, your improvements are still not going to cost you much and a modest purse will allow you to build a reasonable aviary. As long as you don't overdo it with the numbers of canaries you obtain, your feeding budget will be remarkably low, even with the extra food requirements at breeding time.

[2]

Top left: The Fife canary is a miniature breed developed from the border. It takes its name from Fife, a county in Scotland.

Bottom left: The German crested canary looks like a color canary with a crest.

Bottom right: The Gibber Italicus is a canary in which posture and frilled plumage have been combined.